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The Hero of the "Wreck of the Independence."

**SOME INCIDENTS IN THE LIFE OF COLONEL A. F. RODGERS,
A VETERAN OF THE MEXICAN AND CIVIL WARS.**

BY W. T. NORTON.

Alton, Illinois, October 14, 1914.

There is now living in the Upper Alton section of Alton a quiet, unassuming gentleman of handsome physique and soldierly bearing whose history is one of heroic achievement and patriotic adventure rarely equaled. Yesterday was the eighty-seventh anniversary of his birth and serves to recall certain leading events in his notable career. I refer to A. F. Rodgers, a veteran of the Mexican War, and late colonel of the Eightieth Illinois Volunteers in the Civil War. Of the four hundred soldiers who enlisted in Madison County for the Mexican War, Colonel Rodgers and Lem. Southard of Wanda, are the only survivors. Though on the sunset side of life Colonel Rodgers is still hale and strong, but is inconvenienced somewhat by impaired eyesight. His life partner of over fifty years still abides with him. They occupy a beautiful home on the site of the old Rodgers homestead established in 1834, where they live alone, their children having fared forth to homes of their own.

It seems fitting to recall some of the stirring and inspiring events of a career which exemplifies alike the spirit of militant manhood and patriotic service. In addition to events within my personal knowledge I am indebted to a record of incidents in her father's life made by Mrs. H. K. Barnett, Colonel Rodgers' daughter, and to later documents, for many of the facts in the following narration.

Colonel Andrew Fuller Rodgers was born October 13, 1827, in Howard County, Missouri. He was the son of Rev. Eben-

ezer and Permelia Rodgers. The former was a Baptist clergyman, a native of England, who came to America in 1818, and settled soon after in Howard County, where he married Permelia Jackson, a native of Tennessee, and a daughter of Captain John Jackson, who commanded a company at the battle of New Orleans in 1815. After their marriage they located on a farm, but the Rev. Rodgers devoted a part of his time to teaching and preaching. In 1834, when young Rodgers was seven years of age, the family removed to Illinois, locating on a farm that is now a part of the city of Alton. Here the Rev. Rodgers engaged actively in the laborious duties of a pioneer preacher and in advancing the cause of education, being one of the early trustees of Shurtleff College. In this environment young Rodgers grew up, alternately attending school and working on the farm. He was a student at Shurtleff where he had as classmates Hugh Murray, who became chief justice of California, and Lansing Mizner, who, also, became a California pioneer and one of its foremost statesmen.

In June, 1846, Colonel Rodgers, then a youth of 18, enlisted in Company E, Second Illinois Volunteers, under Colonel William H. Bissell, and proceeded with his regiment to Mexico where he endured many hardships and privations. He took part in the memorable battle of Buena Vista, February 23, 1847,, but passed through that bloody contest unharmed. In this battle Lieutenants Ferguson, Fletcher and Robbins of Alton, were killed, and Captain Baker mortally wounded. Colonel Rodgers' enlistment was for one year and after further service in Mexico he was mustered out in the summer of 1847 and returned home, almost a physical wreck from the sufferings of the campaign. A feature of the home-coming which he recalls with interest was the welcome to the returned Mexican soldiers by the citizens, which was a gala occasion, including a barbecue, grand banquet with patriotic toasts and addresses, where eloquence flowed essentially unconfined.

The winter after his return from Mexico he again entered Shurtleff, but the spirit of adventure remained with him and in 1849, in company with his brother John, he joined a party

of argonauts bound for the gold mines of the Pacific coast. After a long and arduous trek across the plains, enlivened by many exciting incidents and encounters with Indians, the party arrived in California, the trip occupying three months, where the Rodgers brothers engaged in mining with varying success. Tiring, at length, of mining the colonel went to Sacramento, intending to return home, but changing his plans, became a deputy sheriff under Ben. McCulloch. In this capacity he passed through many stirring scenes in the continuous battle for law and order in a turbulent community where lynch law had previously been the method of regulating society, and where the colonel's nerve was often put to a severe test but never failed him. In the fall of 1851, the brothers decided to return home. John had \$5,000 to exhibit to his parents as the result of his mining operations, but the colonel had not been so fortunate, having lost money through generous assistance to others.

After a brief visit home the colonel decided to return to California and, accompanied by five Upper Alton friends, started again for the land of gold, going by way of the Isthmus. After crossing to the Pacific coast they embarked on the ill fated steamer "Independence," which sailed from San Juan del Sur, February 16, 1853. A few days later the ship struck a rock off the coast of Margarita Island and immediately began to sink. This occurred early in the morning when most of the passengers were asleep. At first the passengers were assured by the ship's officers that there was no danger, but suddenly fire broke out from the engine room and spread rapidly over the doomed vessel. Then ensued a panic among the passengers that baffles description. The life-boats were few and inadequate. Some that were lowered were swamped; others reached the shore with frenzied seamen and passengers clinging to the sides. Many who could find no place in the boats jumped overboard and attempted to swim ashore. Soon the surface of the sea was dotted with the heads of the unfortunates. Some reached the shore and others were swept out to sea. The scene was one of unspeakable horror

and anguish. In less than an hour 150 of the 400 passengers of the Independence had found a watery grave. In this dire calamity, Colonel Rodgers proved the hero of the wreck and many owed their lives to his coolness and courage. Grouped on deck at the point farthest removed from the encroaching fire, was a company of men, women and children, including the families of Judge Tarr of California, and of a Mr. Watson, I believe from Pennsylvania, all prominent people. Fifteen feet below them, rising and falling on the waves, was the last life-boat. To leap into it imperiled not only those therein, but the persons jumping, and was a practically impossible feat for women and children. Colonel Rodgers solved the difficulty. Climbing over the ship's side on to the gunwale, he held on by thrusting one leg through a hawser hole, thus leaving his arms free. In that position the captain passed the women and children over to him and he lowered them safely into the boat. As the overloaded boat pushed away the colonel climbed back on deck. One child, almost an infant, was left in its father's arms. The colonel seized it and tossed it into the receding boat. It fortunately alighted unharmed almost in its mother's arms, who was shrieking to have it saved. It was little Elsie Watson, the youngest of a family of four daughters and a son. The eldest was a beautiful girl of sixteen, named Ella, of whom more anon. Both the Tarr and Watson families have, of late years, been connected with a series of remarkable reunions between the shipwrecked survivors. It will be noted that, during this scene, the colonel could easily have saved himself, but with the rare unselfishness that has always characterized his life, his only thought was the rescue of others. After this last boat had pushed off there remained on deck only Colonel Rodgers, Captain Sampson, Judge Tarr and son, Horace, Mr. Watson and son. The flames were all about them and the only refuge was the sea. Judge Tarr entreated Colonel Rodgers to save his son, saying he, Tarr, could not swim. Mr. Watson made the same request for his son. The one asking first had the prior claim. Taking the boy on his arm, the colonel slipped down a rope into the

water and, after a desperate struggle through the breakers, reached the shore too exhausted to pull himself and his burden upon the rocks, but his Upper Alton friends, who had landed safely and been watching for him, here came to his aid and both were saved. Of the others on deck who followed the colonel, Captain Sampson and Mr. Watson reached the shore. Judge Tarr and Mr. Watson's son were drowned. Just before Rodgers reached the shore some drowning wretch under water seized hold of his heel and pulled him under, but he was saved by the sock coming off, he having left his shoes on the ship.

The island on which the shipwrecked mariners were landed was a desolate waste, devoid of vegetation and as waterless as a desert. The beach was strewn with the bodies of the dead cast ashore. The scenes of horror were indescribable. Husbands and wives suddenly separated by death; children weeping for their parents; parents for their children. The bodies of the dead were collected by the survivors and buried on the beach, but many of the lost never came ashore, but were washed out to sea to become the prey of sharks. For three days the half-clad passengers and crew remained on the island without food, water or shelter, suffering agonies from hunger, thirst and cold until, through the exertions of Colonel Rodgers and others, relief was obtained. They tramped across the rocky island (the colonel with his feet wrapped in rags) a distance of several miles, to Magdalena Bay, where they hailed some whaling ships. The seamen at once came to the rescue. The sufferers were conveyed to the ships and a month later were landed in San Francisco. There the passengers separated, going to their several destinations. The colonel and those he had rescued lost track of each other, the former going at once to the mines. Through removals and the failure of mails they knew nothing of each other's whereabouts for nearly sixty years, until brought together again by a series of the strangest coincidences imaginable.

The colonel remained in California until 1854, when he received news of the death of his father, and returned to Alton. The Watsons remained in California for some years and then

returned east, with the exception of the oldest daughter, Ella, who married Hon. Lansing Mizner, and remained there. Mr. Mizner was a step-son of General James Semple, United States senator from Illinois. Mrs. Judge Tarr and son Horace eventually returned to their old home in Missouri, the latter being the boy with whom the colonel swam ashore.

After returning home Colonel Rodgers resumed the quiet life of a farmer and in May, 1860, was married to Jane F. Delaplain, member of a prominent Godfrey family, who still remains the loved companion of his long life. In 1862, responding to the call of his country, the colonel raised nearly three companies of soldiers in Madison County, and was assigned to the Eightieth Regiment, Illinois Volunteers, of which command he was elected lieutenant colonel. A few weeks later the regiment was engaged in the battle of Perryville, the fifty-second anniversary of which has just been celebrated at Sparta by a regimental reunion. Owing to the retirement of the colonel in this battle, Lieutenant Colonel Rodgers was left in command of the regiment until struck in the head by a fragment of shell and thrown from his horse. He was picked up unconscious and reported dead. However, he proved very much alive. Under the care of his brother, the assistant surgeon of the regiment, he soon rallied at the hospital and recovered. Then followed a period of active service in various fields until the Eightieth was assigned to the command of General A. D. Straight, and participated in the ill-fated campaign known as "Straight's raid." After a victorious march through a part of Alabama and Georgia, inflicting much damage on the enemy, the command was finally surrounded by a superior force and compelled to surrender. The prisoners were conveyed first to Atlanta, and then the officers were transferred to Libby prison in Richmond. Here they remained for nearly a year and were then taken to Macon, thence to Charleston, where Colonel Rodgers and other officers were placed under the fire of Federal batteries. Hearing of this, our government retaliated by putting fifty Confederate officers, whom it held, in a similar position. When this was

done the Confederates had a change of heart and agreed to an exchange of prisoners. The Union officers were placed on a steamer and conveyed to New York from whence the colonel, after reporting, returned home in the fall of 1864. After a brief rest, he prepared to rejoin his regiment, but was ordered to report to General Rosecrans at St. Louis. By request of that officer he recruited the 144th Regiment and was offered its command, but declined, preferring to return to his regiment, to the full colonelcy of which he had been promoted while in prison. However, his health had been so impaired by the sufferings and privations of prison life that he was at length obliged to resign his commission.

Again taking up the peaceful life of a farmer, after his tempestuous career, he became active in civil and political life, and one of the most prominent and popular citizens of the county. In 1870 he was elected to the Legislature on the Democratic ticket and made an enviable record for ability in the discharge of his legislative duties at Springfield. At home he was active in county fairs and farmers' institutes and other measures for the advancement of agriculture. Much of his time, of late years, has been devoted to the upbuilding of the Piassa Chautauqua, of which he was a director. He built a cottage there and has long made it his summer home. In his present hale and honored old age, the retrospect of his military and civic achievements must bring to him much of pleasure and satisfaction.

And now I come to the relation of a series of coincidences that have a parallel only in the pages of romance. I have told briefly of the wreck of the Independence and of the heroism of Colonel Rodgers in saving many lives, and of the separation of the colonel and those he had rescued from a watery grave. Separated by time and distance, by our hero's roving life after the wreck, and then by the cataclysm of the Civil War, they had known nothing of each other for nearly sixty years. He had heard, incidentally, that his old friend and comrade, Lansing Mizner, had married a Miss Ella Watson, but was not certain that she was the young girl he had lowered

into the life-boat from the burning deck. Nor did he know of the subsequent careers of the Watson and Tarr families. And here comes in the incident that led to the reunion of the survivors of the Independence. A few years ago, the Rev. Henry Watson Mizner of St. Louis, son of Lansing Mizner and Ella Watson, read in his morning paper of a meeting of survivors of the Mexican War in Alton. Visiting our city later on clerical business, he asked for the address of any old Mexican soldiers in Alton to inquire if they remembered his father, Lansing Mizner at the battle of Buena Vista. He was directed to Colonel Rodgers. When the two met and Mr. Mizner had introduced himself as the son of Lansing Mizner, the Colonel asked if it was true that his visitor's father had married Ella Watson. He was answered affirmatively, but the inquirer could scarcely believe that Mr. Mizner was the son of the girl he had last seen during the terrible scenes related above. The clerical guest was equally impressed by the unexpected outcome of his call. He had known from childhood of the wreck of the Independence and heard from his mother's lips the story of the heroic young man to whom so many owed their lives. It was hard for him to realize that the stalwart veteran before him was the "Mr. Rodgers" of whose bravery he had often heard. Needless to say that the interview was a most interesting one to both parties. Several months later Mrs. Ella Watson Mizner, on a visit to her son in St. Louis, stopped at Alton and visited at the home of Colonel Rodgers, after letters of mutual congratulation had passed between them.

But there is another strange coincidence connected with the lives of Colonel Rodgers and the young lad, Horace Tarr, with whom he swam from the wreck of the Independence. He had lost all knowledge of the boy and supposed him long since dead. But it seems that young Tarr, after the return with his mother to the States, had gone to relatives in New England. He, too, had lost all knowledge of both Colonel Rodgers and of his friends, the Watsons. At the time the war broke out he was a student at Yale University. Although under age

he had enlisted, and served through the Civil War, coming out at the age of twenty with the rank of captain. He engaged in manufacturing after the war in New York, Chicago and his home city, Philadelphia. He became a man of wealth and influence. His business required him to make frequent trips to Europe. On a late voyage he became acquainted with another son of Mrs. Ella Watson Mizner, who was a fellow passenger. Their conversation drifted one evening to the subject of California, and Captain Tarr spoke of his having been shipwrecked on his voyage to that State in his boyhood. "What was the name of the ship?" asked Mr. Mizner. "The Independence," was the reply. "Why, my mother was on that ship," exclaimed Mr. Mizner. And then came the story of the wreck as Captain Tarr knew it from experience and as Mr. Mizner knew it from his mother's relation. This revelation was as unexpected and startling as was that between Colonel Rodgers and the Rev. Mizner. Through his chance acquaintance, Captain Tarr learned that the "Mr. Rodgers" who had saved his life was still living and a resident of Alton. The news gave him immense gratification. On his return to America he immediately called on Mrs. Mizner at her residence on Long Island, and the reunion of the shipwrecked companions of sixty years previous was a most pleasant one. Captain Tarr also at once opened correspondence with Colonel Rodgers, and his letter was a beautiful tribute of gratitude and remembrance. The colonel, he said, had always, through his subsequent life, been his ideal of a hero. He wrote that he would, at the earliest opportunity, visit his rescuer and express his gratitude in person. This visit he paid last fall to the mutual gratification of the colonel and himself.

And now at the opening of his eighty-seventh year, the people among whom he dwells, greet Colonel Rodgers with renewed expressions of gratitude for the life he has lived, for the heroism it has exemplified, and the honor it has conferred upon his country. May the remaining years of his life be many and all filled with sweetness and light.